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BELF competence as business knowledge of internationally operating business professionals

Abstract

Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) has come to dominate as the shared code used to ‘get work done’ in international business. In this paper, we explore internationally operating business professionals’ perceptions of BELF communication and its “success” at work, based on selected data from an online survey (N=987) and in-depth interviews (N=27) conducted in European multinational companies. The findings show that BELF can be characterized as a simplified, hybridized and highly dynamic communication code. BELF competence calls for clarity and accuracy of content (rather than linguistic correctness) and knowledge of business-specific vocabulary and genre conventions (rather than only ‘general’ English). In addition, since BELF interactions take place with NNSs from a variety of cultural backgrounds, the relational orientation is perceived as integral for BELF competence. In sum, BELF competence can be considered an essential component of business knowledge required in today’s global business environment.

Keywords: BELF (Business English as a lingua franca), international business communication, international business, globalization, communication competence, business knowledge

Introduction

Increased globalisation has meant that not only countries and companies but also individual business professionals now need to collaborate and compete internationally (Friedman, 2006). For globalisation to continue, access to a shared language facility is – and has been – indispensable (Charles, 2007), and it is now beyond dispute that Business English as a Lingua Franca (or BELF, Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kankaanranta, 2005) has come to dominate as the language of international business over the past few decades (e.g. Seidlhofer, Breiteneder & Pitzl, 2006; Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson & Planken, 2007; Charles, 2007; Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Gerritsen & Nickerson, 2009). BELF is “a ‘neutral’ and shared communication code for the function of conducting business” (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005) and it is this purpose and domain of use, i.e. the ‘B’, which distinguishes it from ELF (or English as a Lingua Franca; see e.g. Jenkins, 2000, 2007; Seidlhofer 2000, 2001, 2004). Although we will not elaborate on the ‘B’ in this paper further, we want to point out that for us it entails the professional domain of internationally operating companies and the people representing various “cultural identities” (Jameson, 2007) who constitute that domain, which can be characterized by its goal-oriented (inter)actions, drive for efficient use of such resources as time and money, and an overall aspiration for win-win scenarios among business partners. For this reason, we will use the term BELF when we refer to the shared language facility of the domain (for a thorough account about BELF, see Gerritsen & Nickerson, 2009; also Du Babcock, 2009).

The dominance of BELF in the international business arena is supported by the introduction of English as the official corporate language in several Europe-based multinationals (MNCs), in favour of local languages (see e.g. Fredriksson, Barner-Rasmussen & Piekkari, 2006; Maclean, 2006; Vollstedt, 2002; Vandermeeren, 1999). But although a number of studies have investigated aspects of BELF and its potential impact on interpersonal dynamics and doing business (e.g. Marschan-Piekkari, Welch & Welch, 1999; Nickerson, 1999, Poncini, 2004; Planken, 2005; Bjorge, 2007; Rogerson-Revell, 2007) and most business communication scholars would agree that language – in this case BELF – matters in business communication in general, and in successful business communication in particular, there has been relatively little systematic research to date that has focused on “how and why it matters” (Louhiala-Salminen, 2009) or that has attempted to determine the characteristics of BELF discourse.

Some investigations into the discourse of BELF do exist, however. For example, Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005; also Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006; Kankaanranta, 2006) identified a number of differences in Finnish and Swedish speakers’ BELFs, which suggests that BELF carries its speaker’s “culture” and thus the features of his/her mother tongue discourse, at least to some degree (see Meierkord, 2002). For example, Louhiala-Salminen and Charles (2006) found that Finnish spoken BELF tended to be more direct and issue-oriented (see Halliday, 1973) than the Swedish variety. More specifically, the Finnish participants in their BELF meeting data focused primarily on content and did not use as much metadiscourse, repetition, and clarifying questions as the Swedish participants. In BELF writing, on the other hand, differences between Finns and Swedes were not as conspicuous. In Kankaanranta’s (2006) email data, both Finnish and Swedish varieties of BELF could be characterized as “relational” (see Rogers & Hildebrandt, 1993) in the sense that, for example, the writer and the recipients were

referred to by using first names and 1st and 2nd person pronouns. However, based on an analysis of requests in the data, Finnish written BELF was again characterized as somewhat more direct (see e.g. Brown & Levinson, 1987). Kankaanranta (2006) illustrates the difference with an example: while the Finns were inclined to write *Please/Kindly comment on this*, the Swedes favored *Could you please comment on this*.

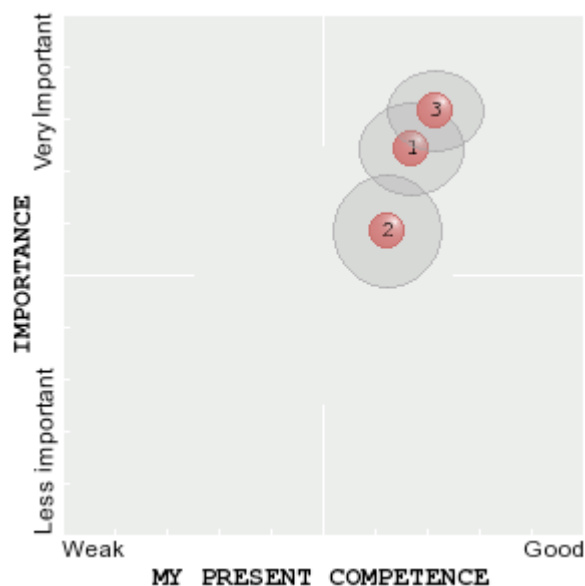
In this paper for the special issue on language matters, our aim is to explore the perceptions of internationally operating business professionals about BELF communication and its “success” at work. In their Call for Papers, the editors of this special issue challenged us by arguing that although English seems to work well for most situations, three questions remain to be answered: *Whose English? What kind of English? and How exactly (does it work)?* The aim of our paper is to address these questions, in addition to discussing some salient contextual features of the use of English in global business.

In order to do so, we will report on the findings from our research project *Does business know how? The role of communication in the business know-how of globalized operations* (www.hse.fi/ckh), which was part of a larger research program funded by the Academy of Finland in 2006-2009 to investigate business know-how. Although based in Finland, the project team also included senior researchers from the Netherlands and Italy. We argue that an integral part of the know-how of today’s business professionals consists of their communication know-how. Since much of the communication in globalized business takes place between non-native speakers of English, we further argue that competence in BELF communication is an integral part of business knowledge and expertise and therefore deserves more investigation.

Study

Because of the multifaceted nature of communication and language use in global business, our approach is multidisciplinary, adopting different methodologies, as suggested by, for example, Bargiela-Chiappini et al.(2007; see also Nickerson, 2005). Since we were particularly interested in the perceptions of internationally operating business professionals of their own and their partners' BELF communication, we conducted both an on-line questionnaire survey targeted at business professionals in five globally operating Finland-based companies and related interviews with mostly Western European business professionals.

The online survey was aimed at business professionals whose work involves regular international interaction, and our aim was to explore the nature of that communication, as perceived by our respondents. Although the survey instrument offered some distinctly quantitative data about the respondents and their communicative situations, the major part of the instrument was designed in such a way that the respondents were able to evaluate the significance of a particular factor in relation to other factors. By clicking on a particular spot in a four-quadrant graph, for instance, the respondent could evaluate his/her belief in a statement along two dimensions. After all the respondents had indicated their evaluations, the instrument produced graphs showing how the different statements had been evaluated. Figure 1 shows an example of such a four-quadrant graph on possible success features of BELF discourse and how the results looked after the respondents had rated their perceptions about having a wide vocabulary of English, using grammatically correct language, and knowing the English vocabulary of their own business area. As the figure shows, the statements were rated according to their *Importance* (vertical axis) and the respondents' *Present competence* (horizontal axis). The inner circles represent the mean values of the evaluations and the outer circles represent standard deviation.



For my communication to succeed, it is important that
 (1) I have a wide vocabulary of English;
 (2) the English I use is grammatically correct;
 (3) I know the English vocabulary of my own business area.

Figure 1. Sample graph.

As can be seen from Figure 1, the three dots depicting the three statements appear in the top right hand quadrant of the graph, indicating that the respondents had rated both the importance of the statements fairly high and the respondents' present competence fairly good. The relative importance of the three statements is demonstrated by their positions in relation to each other. The results obtained from such graphs thus reflect the respondents' perceptions of the given factors visually rather than give exact percentages. The same applies to graphs in which only one factor was being evaluated; for an example, see Figure 2, which shows our respondents' estimates of their communication with native speakers vs. non-native speakers (NS vs. NNS) of English.

Using this survey instrument, we focused both on the use of the English language and on a number of contextual features of communicative situations such as characteristics of the English language competence required at work (e.g. grammar, pronunciation), characteristics of communication partners (e.g. NS and NNS), and various communication practices (e.g. company internal vs. external communication). In addition, the respondents were asked to indicate how they would rank a number of characteristics of business communication that textbooks typically consider effective (e.g. directness, clarity, politeness; see e.g. Munter, 2009); they were able to further elaborate on their perceived communicative “success” in the global business environment in the open questions of the survey.

The five companies surveyed operate in different fields such as IT and business intelligence services, cargo handling, and logistics. In total, we received 987 responses corresponding to a response rate of 52%. Although the respondents represented 31 different native languages and more than 20 countries, the native tongue of almost 40% of them was Finnish, and overall, Western European languages dominated (85%). The most common non-European languages (Chinese, Tamil, and Korean) accounted for 13% of the total. Approximately 80% of the respondents had a university degree; 60% were under 40 years of age; and male respondents accounted for 75% of the sample (for more details of the survey, see Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, forthcoming).

The survey was followed up by semi-structured interviews to give us some deeper insight into the opinions and attitudes of 27 internationally operating Western European business professionals (all NNSs) in five Europe-based MNCs. The countries in which the interviews were conducted were Finland (April-May 2008) and the Netherlands (February-March 2009); the choice of the interview locations was practical as our research team had members in both

countries. In Finland, the interviewees were chosen from among the survey respondents who had announced their willingness to be interviewed. For reasons of consistency and practicality, only Finnish speaking respondents from the two largest companies, both MNCs, in the survey with major units in the vicinity of Helsinki were contacted. In the Netherlands, three MNCs headquartered in the country were approached; they operated in similar industries as the Finnish MNCs, i.e. in IT management solutions, logistics but also in global HRM. Since the interviewees were selected by the contact persons in the companies, the process was different to that applied in Finland. Also, while the Dutch interviews were conducted in Dutch or English, in Finland, they were in Finnish.

The 27 interviews of around one hour were held either on the companies' premises (N=24) or over the telephone (N=3). Most of the interviewees were Europeans: the Finnish sample included fifteen Finns (referred to as F1-15) and the Dutch sample eight Dutch, two Portuguese, an Italian and a Brazilian (referred to - in random order to prevent identification - as D1-D12). A good half of the interviewees were under 40 years of age (N=15) and male (N=16). University degrees (mostly MSc's in business or engineering) outnumbered higher vocational degrees (N=23 vs. N=4) and a clear majority of the interviewees (N=25) held managerial positions (senior or junior) in their companies. For example, the Finnish sample included a VP, a managing director, and six project managers and the Dutch sample had a director, two department heads, and a number of specialist managers. Overall, the Finnish interviewees were proportionally older than the interviewees in the Dutch sample; 60% of them were over 40 years of age whereas the figure was only 25% for the Dutch sample. Interestingly, the demographics of both the survey respondents and the interviewees were similar: a majority of our informants were male, under 40 years of age and held a university degree (see Table 1).

Table 1. Key demographics of informants.

Demographics/Informants	Survey respondents	Interviewees
Male	75%	60%
Under 40 years of age	60%	55%
University degree	80%	85%

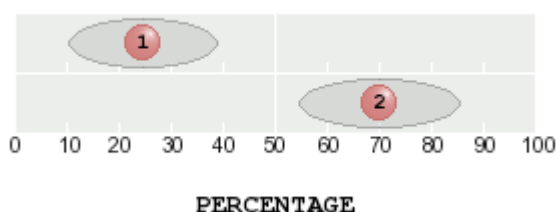
All the 27 interviews were recorded and transcribed shortly after. We organized the raw data using the following three main topics of our interviews as a framework: (1) the use of English at work (why, when, how much, with whom, about what, etc.), (2) the nature of English communication (characteristics, differences/similarities between speakers, etc.), (3) the notion of “success” in BELF communication, the (individual and situational) factors that contribute (or not) to such “success” and the strategies that individuals use to optimize their BELF communication in the interests of “success”. In other words, we coded the data and classified it into emerging themes and categories under the three topics. Such codes that appeared only once or twice without support or that did not fit any of the identified categories were disregarded since our aim was to find overall tendencies and central concepts relevant for BELF competence rather than idiosyncrasies or details pertinent to a particular situation. Since we approached communication from the perspective of an individual rather than that of the corporation, we will not address issues related to the corporate language policies in this paper unless specifically taken up by our interviewees.

In the remainder of our paper, we focus mainly on the findings from the qualitative interviews and use the survey data to complement and give background to the issues emerging from the interviews. Before moving on to our findings, however, a word about the reporting is in order. Following Sandelowski's (2001; see also Pratt, 2009) argument about using numbers in qualitative research, we want to explicate what we mean by certain vocabulary connoting indeterminate quantity in our findings. In the present paper, the term 'a number' or 'some' refers to more than two interviewees but not a majority. A/the 'majority' or 'most' refers to 14 or more interviewees, and where the Finnish and Dutch data are considered separately: eight or more interviewees in the case of the Finnish sample and seven or more interviewees in the case of the Dutch sample. When only a single respondent is referred to, this is always indicated in the text.

We report on our findings using the three questions posed by the editors of this special issue as a compass. Under *Whose English?* we focus on the conceptions of the users of English in international business operations, i.e. NSs and NNSs and the attitudes of our interviewees towards them. In answering the second question, *What kind of English?*, we focus our attention on the discursual features of BELF, and in our answer to the third question, *How exactly (does English work)?*, we attempt to address the salient discourse strategies of “successful” BELF communication, as perceived by our survey respondents and interviewees.

Whose English?

Based on the survey, a good 70% of the English communication of internationally operating business professionals on average could be characterized as BELF as it took place between NNSs, as Figure 2 shows.



How many percent of your communication in English takes place with
(1) Native speakers of English?
(2) Non-native speakers of English?

Figure 2. Communication with NSs (1) and NNSs (2).

BELF communication dominated with our interviewees as well; interactions with NNSs ranged from 70% to 100% of the total of their English language interactions. On the whole, our survey respondents did not feel that they were more successful in their communication with NSs than NNSs. Neither did they feel that NS-like pronunciation was an essential element in effective communication. Similarly, the interviewees hardly ever associated English with any specific native speaker model or with a national culture or its values such as the UK, US, or Australia; rather, the majority saw it as global and neutral. When the interviewees were asked about their perceptions of communication with NSs vs. NNSs, most of them seemed to have a clear conception about the differences between the two situations, characterizing oral interactions with NSs as unequal and asymmetrical and for this reason more difficult than with NNSs. On the up side, however, some also noted that “the flow of communication” was often “more natural” and “smooth” in contacts with NSs than in contacts with NNSs, which made them feel more comfortable in such interactions. In written genres, the differences between writing to NNSs or to NSs were less conspicuous. The majority of the interviewees noted that in both situations there was more time to contemplate how to write something down or what a word or an expression in

writing meant. Still, most of the Dutch sample had official written documentation in English checked by peers or superiors at least some of the time, although some commented that this was in relation to issues of content rather than the language. Maybe because of their seniority and more extensive work experience, our Finnish interviewees hardly reported such practices.

The interviewees compared NSs to powerful players in the business context, such as customers and clients or colleagues high on the corporate hierarchy; consequently, with them, a majority of the interviewees paid special attention to their own language use and the “correctness” of their English. Some felt that NSs tried to gain the upper hand through their mother tongue, which made the communicative situations with them unequal. The challenges faced by our interviewees in interaction with NSs could be roughly divided into three groups: first, the relative lack of competence in relation to overall flexibility in using English and the limited repertoire of phraseology, idioms and stylistic nuances; second, fast tempo of speech; and third, the incomprehensibility of some regional US and UK accents. Some of the Dutch sample noted that they had at times felt fairly intimidated when communicating with NSs, as they had felt that NSs in such cases had explicitly drawn attention to or emphasized the difference in language competence. This can be seen in a quotation from one of our interviewees: “They say at the beginning: ‘Oh dear, shall I speak more slowly for you?’ Well, that shows you your place immediately”¹ (D5). In their contacts with NSs, a majority of our interviewees reported adopting one of the following approaches: they either consciously attempted to learn English from NSs by, for example, adopting phraseology or imitating their pronunciation or they simply tried to keep up with NSs and survive the situation.

¹ All translations from Finnish and Dutch into English were done by the researchers and any inaccuracies are their responsibility alone.

In contrast to NSs, NNSs were typically considered equal communication partners by our interviewees, in spite of some obvious challenges posed by their various accents and proficiency levels. Indeed, some NNS accents were considered particularly demanding, such as Chinese and Indian English, but the general idea, voiced by some of our interviewees, seemed to be that as long as you hear a particular accent often enough, you gradually get used to it. This may well apply to NS accents as well although this did not come up in the interviews, maybe because contacts with NSs were markedly less frequent. The proficiency levels of fellow NNSs varied from very poor to native-like in the interviewees' experience. The communication situations with very fluent NNSs were not considered as demanding as those with NSs although one interviewee pointed out that it may be the case at times: "with other non-natives, mastery [of English] can work against you" (D7). This perception was explained by some interviewees by the fact that English in those NNS-NNS situations was still a foreign language to both parties, regardless of the participants' individual proficiency levels, and that they thus shared an understanding and feel for the challenges posed by the situation. They were "in the foreign language mode", as one of the interviewees (F14) put it, emphasizing that understanding was not taken for granted in the same way as when the mother tongue was used.

Since accommodation practices with different types of English users seemed to be the general practice in the majority of our interviewees' communication, 'whose English' was spoken depended largely on the other party's competence and know-how. If his/her language proficiency was weaker, our interviewees would simplify their English, i.e. use simpler structures and words, thus making a special effort to guarantee understanding. If, however, they were talking to an equally or more fluent language user, they did not feel the need to adapt their communication. Some interviewees noted that they had observed similar accommodating

behavior by their communication partners but more consistently by other NNSs than by NSs. Even if NSs occasionally attempted to simplify their language use or slow down their speech rate, they tended to quickly change back to their normal level of complexity and speed.

Based on the perceptions of NS vs. NNS communication, it comes perhaps as no surprise that most of the business professionals we interviewed did not consider a NS as a desirable role model for their English competence, although some of them felt that communicating with NSs did allow them to improve their English skills. Rather, they emphasized the need for clarity – rather than correctness – in communication, which suggests that their role model would be a person whose communication can be characterized as such. This takes us to the second question: What kind of English (is used in international business operations)?

What kind of English?

The English discourse of the 987 internationally operating business professionals surveyed online can be characterized as mostly BELF discourse since, as pointed out above, a good 70% of it took place between NNSs. The estimated percentages of our 27 interviewees in this respect varied from 70% to 100%. Although our interviewees often spoke about the English language and its context of use simultaneously, we have attempted to separate the two here for reasons of clarity. We thus address the key contextual features governing BELF use first before moving on to the characteristics of BELF discourse.

Contextual features of BELF use

Overall, three contextual factors emerged as relevant in the interviewees' conception of BELF discourse: the shared business domain of BELF use, the shared special field of expertise,

and the length of relationship with the communication partner. We now take a closer look at each of these factors in turn.

The general domain of BELF use is international business, where it is used with colleagues and with different types of business partners. According to our respondents and interviewees, most of its use took place within the company, with colleagues either in the same location or in the company's overseas units. Based on the survey, internal communication accounted for 70% of BELF use on average, and for the Finnish interviewees, who were mostly project managers and not involved in sales, the percentage was close to 100%. For experienced business professionals such as those in our study, the business domain, with its inbuilt profit-oriented principles, goal-based genres and task-related, time-constrained processes, represents largely implicit knowledge, which is shared within the business discourse community. As one interviewee noted, BELF is “more purposeful, task-oriented and persuasive [than general English]” and “they don't teach you that in courses” (D4). Another interviewee put it like this: “The best school to learn [BELF] is the real-life practice” (F11). Thus, at least some of this business knowledge is likely to remain hidden from outsiders to the domain and initially from novice, aspiring business professionals.

The second contextual feature that was perceived as relevant for BELF discourse was the shared professional area of expertise involving special concepts and terminology, as used by the relevant discourse community. Although our interviewees often commented on the specific vocabulary in particular, and thus the BELF proper, by listing this issue here we want to emphasize the shared professional culture and shared context in which that vocabulary is used. This point was also emphasized by one of the interviewees, who said that as one's own knowledge of the field deepened and thus expertise increased, it also helped communication with

the partners who did not know English so well. Indeed, BELF communication about work-related issues with those sharing knowledge about the domain was described as relatively effortless by the majority of interviewees, while communication with non-experts was experienced as challenging.

The third relevant feature for BELF discourse was the significance placed upon the length of the (business) relationship, which came up in all the Finnish interviews and was mentioned by half of the Dutch sample. The general message was as follows: the better you know the other party, the better you know what kind of communication to expect from him/her and how to communicate. Quotations from three interviewees illustrate this: “The longer you’ve known the person, the more you can relax and be yourself” (F2) ; “Knowing someone for longer helps; you know how they go about business, it saves time and feels more comfortable [than new contacts]” (D5); and “When I’m familiar with my partner’s mistakes, I’m able to ignore them and communicate easily with him. Those not familiar with his/her style find it difficult” (F3). These quotations also reflect the uniqueness of BELF communication in comparison to ‘natural’ languages: since BELF is affected by the speaker’s professional expertise, English proficiency, accent, and the discourse practices of his/her mother tongue, it takes time to get used to the idiosyncratic combination of these features.

Characteristics of BELF discourse

While the three contextual features seem integral to BELF discourse, i.e. the shared business domain, the shared professional expertise, and the length of relationship, three features of BELF proper also emerged from the interview data. They can be characterized as simplified

English, specific terminology related to business in general and the professional expertise in particular, and a hybrid of discourse practices originating from the speakers' mother tongues.

First, typical BELF discourse can be characterized as simplified English. Over and over again, our interviewees emphasized the value of using – and accommodating to the level of – simple and clear English, which generally meant that the discourse, i.e. BELF, used with fellow NNSs hardly contained idiomatic expressions, complicated phraseology, or complex sentence structures. Also, grammatical inaccuracies in BELF were reported by the majority of interviewees to be commonplace, but generally of little consequence. This point is well illustrated by the fact that none of our interviewees could give us actual examples of grammatical inaccuracies that had led to miscommunication or misunderstanding. One of the interviewees summarized the views of his fellow professionals like this: “As long as the core message gets across, your English doesn’t need to be perfect” (F13). In oral communication, grammatical inaccuracies were typically ignored or “passed over” (see Firth, 1996) according to some Dutch and most Finnish interviewees, and in those rare cases where they interfered with exchanging information or resulted in misunderstanding, they usually led to a sequence of negotiating meaning until the misunderstanding had been clarified. In written communication, grammatical inaccuracies were not as easy to resolve in situ, but some interviewees reported always checking comprehension of information in official documentation through follow-up emails or phone calls. The interviewees generally held positive attitudes to a simplified version of English used with fellow NNSs, i.e. BELF, with the exception of a small minority of interviewees. One of them was a foreign language enthusiast who was of the opinion that without NS contacts, the English used by NNSs unavoidably narrowed down and became a kind of ‘slang’, in which the same mistakes were repeated, and more fluently with each new occasion. Another noted that having to

use his simplified, not so fluent English affected his (professional) identity: “I’m usually a very outgoing person, but not in English [...], I feel much smaller in meetings” (D6). Similar comments to this one were raised by two other interviewees who admitted being frustrated with the practice of having English as the corporate language as it affected their personality and/or professional impact. Also, since official documentation from headquarters such as performance reports or intranet news did not follow the simplified English characterization, they were considered difficult to understand and thus were often left unread by some Finnish interviewees.

Second, and in perhaps stark contrast to the simplified mechanics of BELF, the general business-related vocabulary, the specific technical jargon, and the mastery of the relevant genres used in BELF were seen by the majority of interviewees as highly specialized, and unique to their distinct disciplines and areas of expertise. This finding was also explicit in the survey (see Figure 1). As a result, BELF discourse was not considered easily accessible to non-experts, as the following quotation demonstrates: “I make sure I slow down or simplify for clients who don’t know about the technical stuff. I also check for understanding and take more time to explain things, if necessary” (F9). Indeed, as Figure 1 shows, the survey respondents perceived the English vocabulary of their own field as more important to successful communication at work than grammatical correctness. One interviewee elaborated on the concept of professional expertise as follows: “Jargon, content and vocabulary is where you get the differences between disciplines, in English too [...] what’s important for effectiveness is sharing the jargon and content” (D6). Communication about one’s own expertise with non-experts was seen as challenging; but it was challenging also about issues not necessarily related to one’s expertise; in light of such challenges, flexibility in using accommodating, paraphrasing and comprehension-checking strategies in BELF was mentioned by some interviewees as an

important factor in successful communication. One of the interviewees described it like this: “You need to be able to translate your specific knowledge to suit the other party; you’re not always at the same level. How I talk to project teams, also internationally, is completely different to how I talk to clients about projects. I need to adapt the content, be flexible, regardless of the language I’m using” (F8).

Third, BELF discourse seems to include a hybrid of features that partly originate from those of the speaker’s own mother tongue and partly from those of other BELF speakers’ mother tongues. These features relate to aspects such as the proportion of issue vs. relational talk, directness vs. indirectness (or explicit vs. implicit talk) and politeness-related phenomena. For example, the majority of our Dutch and Finnish interviewees described themselves as issue-oriented and direct, and reported generally using fewer politeness formulas than BELF speakers with other mother tongues than Dutch and Finnish, although it should be noted that their ideas of what constitutes politeness and polite language varied considerably. Some even gave evidence of changes in their BELF discourse: they increasingly adopted features from their communication partners that were evaluated as generally having a positive influence on communication. Such features were referred to as “social”, “non-business” or “relational” communication or simply “small talk”, and “politeness”. The majority of interviewees reported being aware that there were differences culturally in what is considered socio-pragmatically appropriate or polite but most acknowledged at the same time, and perhaps surprisingly, that such differences, although a potential factor in international contacts, rarely posed a problem or got in the way of business interactions, in their experience at least. As one put it, “you know [...] you’re there to do business, not to hurt each other’s feelings or not” (D7). At the same time, using these relational, “rapport-building” features (see e.g. Spencer-Oatey, 2000; Planken, 2005) was considered by a

number of interviewees as more challenging than communicating business content, and as something that is generally not taught in (business) English courses. However, it was seen as possible to learn to use rapport-building discourse; some of the Finnish interviewees, in particular, mentioned how they had recently recognized that such discourse had crept into their own BELF and/or that of their Finnish colleagues. They even had a name for BELF discourse involving more relational talk: “the international style”. The rationale for this new type of discourse is summed up in a quote from one of the Finnish interviewees (F10): “You should just behave in a non-natural way and realize that it works!” Also, a number of interviewees explained the importance of a more relationally oriented discourse by resorting to recent developments in the business environment more generally. A Dutch interviewee noted that “as networks are important, relationships are important, so it’s more than doing business only” (D12).

In spite of the opinions of some of our Finnish interviewees about the emerging rapport-building nature of BELF discourse, our native Dutch interviewees, in particular, reported that they did not feel that their discourse in English was any different from that in Dutch, albeit a simpler code.

How exactly?

The simple, overall answer to the question of how exactly BELF works from our interviewees and survey respondents is: in such a way that the job gets done! Broadly speaking, three components were considered essential for successful BELF communication (i.e. getting the job done): getting the facts right, making the discourse clear, and ‘making the recipient feel good’.

Repeatedly, our interviewees emphasized the importance of conveying information accurately; to achieve this they had to analyze their audience, estimate their level of professional knowledge, including BELF competence, and act – that is, adapt and accommodate – accordingly. The general message from the interviewees and the respondents in their answers to the open questions of the survey was that conveying information accurately and getting the facts right was more crucial than getting the language correct. None of the 27 interviewees could recall an incident where a misunderstanding had taken place because of reasons that they perceived as related exclusively to language. However, this may be due to the fact that to avoid misunderstandings in conveying information in the first place, all interviewees emphasized the importance of checking and double-checking understanding during – or following – business interactions. For example, a number of interviewees pointed out that they checked, followed up and confirmed in writing such issues with their BELF contacts that they never would have addressed with contacts sharing their respective mother tongues.

The second component of successful BELF communication can be summarized in one word: clarity. We probed the meaning of clarity in the interviews since in the survey it was considered important by a majority of respondents for BELF communication together with directness and politeness. Overall, it could be argued that the term clarity was used to refer to characteristics, such as logical progression, organization, explicitness and readability that are commonly listed as essential in business communication text books (e.g. Munter, 2009) when conveying information. While our survey respondents considered clarity slightly more important for their BELF communication than directness, the interviewees often seemed to use the two words interchangeably or simultaneously. The majority noted that to achieve clarity in BELF communication, the discourse should be explicit (unambiguous), simple (without complex words

or structures), and compact (without unnecessary words, repetition); as one interviewee put it: “When you say a lot you say nothing. [...] In my domain [financial control] less is more” (D2). Further, some of the interviewees were of the opinion that written texts should be designed and organized in such a way that key information is readily discernible and up front, so that there is no need to waste time skimming an entire document for it. As one interviewee noted, “decide what the core of the idea is and present that to the receiver, to save their time” (F1). Overall, helping the reader by using layout devices such as bullet points and listing was considered normal and effective practice in writing by most of the Finnish interviewees.

Some of the Dutch sample noted that being able to gauge directness is important in international interactions, one noting this was so “particularly in China and the UK: what does ‘yes’ mean? So I always check and double-check” (D1). Another commented that indirectness can lead to ambiguity and “slow down business, particularly in contacts with Asian counterparts” (D6). In a similar vein, another interviewee noted that indirectness is complicated because using it equals “dishonesty to a certain extent”, while business interactions usually require “honesty”, i.e. directness and clarity. According to this interviewee (D4), the trick is “to learn to use the right dose of (in)directness”, so as not to compromise clarity on the one hand or put a brake on communication and creativity on the other. This latter point, that is the observation that too much directness (i.e. straightforwardness bordering on bluntness) can overwhelm the other party in a business interaction, was articulated by a number of our interviewees as potentially detrimental to BELF effectiveness.

The third component of successful BELF communication could be summarized as ‘making the recipient feel good’. Although this phrase could be interpreted in a number of ways, in the business context it was related to having communicated information (either in good or bad

news contexts) that was useful or usable to the recipient, and in a manner appropriate to the context and in line with the expectations of the recipient. In email communication, for example, for the majority of our Finnish interviewees, meeting the partner's expectations about such discourse involved a clear structure which highlighted the main points and an appropriate tone which was related to their perceptions of 'politeness'. When we asked our interviewees to elaborate on politeness, they came up with various definitions but basically all referred to the non-factual part of their communication, which was perceived as a factor of positive influence in international contacts, although they had trouble articulating in what way exactly. On the one hand, politeness was conceptualized as relational talk. For example, one of the interviewees described how to draft emails: "first, you say something nice, then you give the facts in bullets, and you close by saying something nice again" (F7). On the other hand, politeness was referred to as the resource available when, for example, softening requests and qualifying bad news. One Finnish interviewee gave very concrete examples of how to express polite requests: he explained that the direct Finnish way would be "I want it now" but in English he would use "I would like to have it now" (F5).

BELF competence is essential in today's global business

Our interview findings indicate that for internationally operating business professionals of today, competence in BELF communication is an essential component of their business knowledge: the majority of our interviewees in both Finland and the Netherlands emphasized that they would not be able to do their work without it. This is how one of them articulated his view: "When I think of English, I think of business" (D2). Another noted that communication "and global English in particular" are "essential to business know-how. As hierarchies disappear,

ideas and solutions and information exchange will become key [...]; it's all about communication" (D1).

However, business professionals operating globally in their daily work would seem to need at least two languages at work: not only English but also their mother tongue. On average, the survey respondents used their mother tongue only slightly more than English but not surprisingly perhaps, individual differences were very large. The majority of our interviewees, for example, reported using English more than their respective mother tongues in email and written documentation; this is mainly due to the fact that typically, two speakers of the same mother tongue exchanged emails in English if there was even the remotest possibility of the message being forwarded to speakers who did not share their mother tongue. Further, different types of process/product specifications were always written in English to guarantee their availability to all relevant members of the international organization. All our interviewees used English in oral interactions as well but in particular those based in the Netherlands used it more frequently since they had a number of international colleagues in their department. A case in point are three of the four non-native Dutch interviewees (Italian, Brazilian, Portuguese), who reported speaking English consistently because there was nobody at work who spoke their native tongue.

The situations where the two languages – mother tongue and BELF – were typically used seemed to overlap and change rapidly: situations such as writing an English email message while speaking on the phone in Finnish or attending a team meeting held in English after discussing the latest project with another Dutch speaker were reported as common occurrences by most of our interviewees. The two languages were also intertwined in interaction; for example, some of our interviewees pointed out how English trickles into their mother tongue talk and how they use

English terms, for example technical jargon, either because they spring to mind more easily than the mother tongue equivalents or because there are no equivalents in the mother tongue. For example, two of the Dutch interviewees noted that English was the language of their specialization (IT). Some of our interviewees also pointed out that they did not necessarily think about what language (mother tongue or BELF) they were using at a particular moment since communication was simply considered part and parcel of the work and English a tool to get the work done. Indeed, some of the Finnish interviewees preferred reading work documents in English rather than in their mother tongue since they would have to “work on them in English anyway” (F12). Competence in BELF, i.e. expertise in the use of English in the business domain and knowledge of how it can serve business goals best, was compared to the ability to use the computer: you could not do your work without it in today’s international workplace.

However, it would appear from the interviews that the use of English at work has not always been taken for granted. In Finland, a major change took place in the mid-1980s and the early 1990s, when the wave of cross-border mergers and acquisitions started to gain momentum. Thus, the working language of the now ‘40 something’ generation of our interviewees changed from Finnish into English practically overnight since their new colleagues and partners did not know Finnish. Similar developments to those in Finland have taken place in the Netherlands, and a number of large – originally Dutch – companies have been involved in cross-border mergers in the interests of globalization. In the three MNCs the Dutch interviewees operate in, English was in fact introduced as the official corporate language at Head Office as a result, in one case as recently as two years ago. These fairly sudden changes caused some degree of initial distress and uncertainty, mostly among the 40 plus generation of our interviewees, but the simultaneous advancement of communication technologies such as fax and email came to their rescue to some

extent. Since they enabled and promoted direct, informal contacts with the new colleagues, there was no other option but to manage as best as they could and learn by doing (with the help of an occasional brush-up course in English), and as a result working in English gradually became ‘just work’ (see e.g. Louhiala-Salminen, 1997). Also, as some of our Finnish interviewees emphasized, it helped a great deal to realize that they shared the challenges of the new communication situation with their new communication partners, most of them NNSs of English too.

Whereas the 40 plus generation had to adapt to the emerging global business environment, the younger generation of business professionals began their working life when globalization was already the order of the day. In fact, a majority of the Dutch sample, who were generally younger than the interviewees in the Finnish sample, admitted to having aimed at a career in international business and therefore had acknowledged early on at university that English proficiency would be central to achieving that objective. One of them put it like this: “English has been instrumental to my education and advancement” (D11), while another noted that “English has been as important as any other tool in my career development, and maybe one of the most important” (D2). Interestingly, the younger generation of the Finnish interviewees seemed to consider English proficiency so integral to their business knowledge that one of them did not even understand the question about the significance of English for his work. Finally, the representatives of the younger generation – in both the Finnish and Dutch samples – admitted to having lived most of their lives surrounded by such examples of the English speaking entertainment industry as MTV, computer games, and the Internet; in other words, they had been regularly exposed to English in other domains than business, and from an early age.

Discussion and conclusions

On the basis of our research, it can be argued that BELF competence is indeed perceived as an essential part of the business knowledge of internationally operating business professionals. The message from both our survey respondents and the interviewees seems to be that English is equated to work and without English the work cannot be done (see also Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010). Furthermore, English is not conceptualized as a language spoken in the UK, the USA or other officially English-speaking regions, but as an international code and operating language used at work, to do the work. Since the English at work was mostly used in interactions between NNSs and it was characterized as different in a number of ways from the English of NSs, we can indeed plausibly characterize it as BELF, an instrument for getting the job done in an international business environment.

Although BELF was originally defined as the language used among NNSs of English only (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005), it could be argued that in today's global business it should be part of all internationally operating business professionals' competence, including NSs of English. Indeed, our findings seem to be in line with Charles and Marschan-Piekkari (2002), who suggested that NSs of English should be trained in the practices of NNSs. We would argue the same, and more specifically, that in BELF training such practices should concentrate on the principles of simplicity, clarity and relational orientation that our survey respondents and interviewees considered essential in their (successful) use of BELF. Interestingly, these principles seem to reflect the recommendations given in many a business communication textbook about effective business communication (see e.g. Munter, 2009; Bovée & Thill, 2010). Although such books are often modeled on – and targeted at – NSs, the message from our interviewees in this respect was explicit: their role model was not a NS or near-native, but a

business professional whose (international) communication is clear. Thus, although a number of the interviewees reported using contacts with NSs as a learning source, copying certain NS idioms and imitating NS pronunciation in an attempt to improve their own BELF, they still cannot be regarded as language learners in the traditional sense (cf. Mauranen, 2003). By the same token, the majority of our interviewees concluded that, despite the various English courses that they might have followed, it is the real-life practice that is the best school for learning to use BELF (see also Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2007).

In our interviewees' opinion, BELF competence is sufficient if its users are able to do their work no matter how limited their English proficiency is. However, it is important to remember that our interview data did not contain members of top management in internationally operating companies, whose work would likely require a higher level of proficiency in English because of the nature of their work. What our interviewees seemed to understand by 'work' was their immediate, everyday tasks and duties but not necessarily knowledge of their employers' latest financial performance, accessible on the company's intranet or website, for example. The English used to communicate such 'corporate' information in the companies where it was the corporate language was considered different from everyday BELF and also clearly more challenging. Although an investigation into corporate documentation was beyond the scope of this study, we would venture to suggest that such standardized published material, either internal or external, will likely adhere to 'standard' English language usage, which was characterized as more demanding than BELF by most of our interviewees. This kind of situation seems to suggest that personnel who are not using BELF regularly at work, unlike our respondents and interviewees, might be disadvantaged by the fact that English is the official corporate language, as suggested by, for example, Fredriksson et al. (2006) and Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999). This

also begs an interesting question: is the domain of written BELF restricted to non-public communication products such as emails, company-internal product specifications and protocols and if so, can we expect it to ever cross over into the public domain, and to corporate websites, for example? And, if the ‘official’ English on corporate websites were to ever resemble BELF, would this have – potentially negative – repercussions for an organization’s image, particularly in the eyes of NS audiences?

As our findings show, competence in BELF would seem to comprise components related to both the context of its use and its discoursal features and strategies. In general, our survey respondents and interviewees regarded shared knowledge of (international) business and of their special field of professional expertise as integral to BELF success. Most of the interviewees also emphasized the importance of the length of relationship, which was reported to contribute to the ease of BELF communication, and of relationship-oriented, i.e. “rapport-building” talk (see e.g. Spencer-Oatey, 2000). However, at the same time, our interviewees reported that relational communication in BELF was more challenging – particularly with new contacts from cultures in opening markets (e.g. China, India) – than talking about their individual expertise or about core business content. Indeed, it seems plausible that the longer a business relationship has existed, the more “common ground” (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and shared business and non-business knowledge exists between partners, which provides them with a ready resource to engage in (more) rapport-building, relational discourse. This in turn can play a role in enhancing the effectiveness of transactional, core business communication in BELF (see e.g. Planken, 2005).

The discourse of BELF can be characterized as an interesting hybrid: a simplified, shared code whose basis is English with highly specialized vocabulary and a variety of discourse practices originating from the speakers’ mother tongue practices, and as such, much like a pidgin

or creole language (see e.g. Bakker, 1994). Aside from its potentially stable core features (see e.g. Seidlhofer, 2001; Jenkins, 2000), BELF discourse is at the same time likely to be highly dynamic and idiosyncratic from one interaction to the next. With each new contact situation, participants will need to renegotiate their shared discourse practices in situ. This, in part, might again explain why length of relationship was seen as such an important contextual factor by our interviewees. The obvious advantage of a longer business relationship is that partners will have progressed beyond the stage of having to (re)negotiate discourse practices with each new encounter and are thus familiar with each other's BELF idiosyncrasies; this will allow them to simply get down to business. Furthermore, since getting the core content across and being understood is paramount for BELF competence, a successful BELF speaker need not be highly fluent, produce grammatically correct language, or have a native English pronunciation. For our respondents and interviewees, reaching for NS criteria is not a pre-requisite for success in BELF. Rather, being able to use the language strategically is seen as vital. The ability to convey business content unambiguously entails that the speaker needs to accommodate to the partner's knowledge level. Also, it entails being able to clarify information and check for understanding. And finally, it entails making the other party feel good, that is, being able to connect on a relational level (see also Kankaanranta, 2006; Campbell, 1998).

The rules or strategies of communication are generally more straightforward in intercultural contexts when either party's native tongue is used since then automatically the discourse strategies of *that particular language* are followed as the norm (see Gerritsen & Nickersson, 2009; also e.g. Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Vandermeeren, 1999). With BELF, no such strategies seem to exist – or they have not yet been systematically established – but it could be argued, based on our findings, that they are being created. Although BELF can be considered a

conduit of the BELF speaker's individual culture (see Meierkord, 2002), with increasing interaction in BELF among NNSs across the globe, it would seem plausible to suggest that in time, it will be those culture-specific practices, together with general business communication practices (see e.g. Munter, 2009) boosting international business best, that will ultimately gain ground and characterize BELF. Signs of this phenomenon were already visible in our data: some of our Finnish interviewees felt that their own and their compatriots' communication style had changed. The reported direct issue-oriented communication of Finns (e.g. Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; also Wilkins & Isotalus, 2009) was perceived as more relational when BELF was used. Interestingly, our Dutch interviewees, who also described themselves as direct and issue-oriented, had not observed any differences in their BELF communication. Although a thorough comparison of the interviewees is beyond the scope of our study, two possible reasons could be suggested: first, the notion of directness may have dissimilar interpretations among the two groups and second, the seniority of the Finnish interviewees provides a longer historical perspective to their own and their colleagues' BELF communication.

Our study has limitations typical of any qualitative enquiry: we are only able to report on the perceptions of 987 survey respondents and 27 interviewees while there is a countless number of internationally operating business professionals, and located around the globe, using BELF. Thus, we are able to provide only a glimpse of the perceptions of some representatives of that enormous group. Further, the findings of our study, although they concern international business, are biased towards Europe in the sense that most of our survey respondents and all our interviewees – apart from one Brazilian – come from Europe originally. But, although we may have presented a Europe-biased perspective on the use of BELF in international operations, we would still argue that the answers to the three questions posed by the editors of this special issue

would be similar if the focus of our study had been truly global. For example, it would seem conceivable that the three central contextual features relevant for BELF use would be the same across the continents, i.e. the importance placed on the shared domain of business, special professional expertise, and the length of relationship.

In addition to acknowledging the limitations of the present study, we would also like to highlight one of its obvious strengths: its multi-method approach. Using semi-structured interviews enabled us to dig deeper into the opinions expressed by our respondents in the online survey, and to gain complementary insights. For example, our interviewees showed us how the term ‘directness’, which was also used in the survey, had (at least) two different interpretations for them: on the one hand, it referred to the clarity of communication and to the front-loaded position of the main content, and on the other, to a relative lack of politeness. Without the interviews, we would not have discovered these two interpretations. A similar observation can be made about the term ‘politeness’, featured in both the survey and the interviews. Here too, our interviewees were found to define politeness in different – and sometimes unexpected – ways although the common denominator of these definitions can be captured in the phrase ‘making the recipient feel good’. For some interviewees, politeness meant using small talk and/or appropriate tone, and for others it meant having communicated useful information in the particular business context. Overall, it would seem that multi-method approaches are the way forward for research conducted in the complex global business environments in which BELF discourse and BELF communication are embedded.

To conclude, we realize that the answers we were able to give to the three questions posed by the editors of this special issue of JBC are by no means exhaustive, but we hope that

they constitute a step forward in our enquiry into the nature of BELF competence required in today's global business environment.

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